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AUTHOR Christensen, Torkil
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the nature and implications of problems that language teachers believe to exist in excessively large classes. A review of the literature on class size indicates three categories of problems, namely pedagogical, management, and affective. Pedagogical problems include: difficulties with speaking, reading, and writing tasks; difficulties with monitoring and providing feedback; problems in individualizing work; avoidance of tasks that are demanding to implement; difficulty getting around the classroom; and poor attention of students. Management problems include: correction of large numbers of essays in writing classes; difficulties with pair and group work; high noise levels; difficulties in attending to all students; discipline problems; and difficulties in returning homework and exams on time. Affective concerns include: difficulty in learning student names; impossibility of establishing good rapport with students; difficulty in attending to weaker students; difficulties in assessing student interests and moods; and teacher boredom with pair and group work. Methods to combat these difficulties are discussed, centering on listening practice in the target language. Teacher-provided listening practice can serve as a structure upon which other activities can be built. (MDM)

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Torkil Christensen（北星学園女子短期大学）

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Large Classes and Their Influence on Language Teaching

Torkil Christensen
Hokusei Junior College

Abstract

This paper discusses the implications of a number of problems language teachers feel to exist in classes that they find excessively large. The discussion shows that also this teaching environment offers ample opportunities for meaningful language teaching, and when exploited they may lead to a very challenging and effective teaching environment. The teacher expressed concerns seem to indicate that very gradual progress, limited correction of homework, a strong listening component, and the use of the target language in the classroom would overcome most of the problems perceived to exist in large classes.

Introduction

Language teaching in large classes has not attracted particular attention until the establishment of the Lancaster Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project about five years ago. Since then a number of studies have appeared and helped provide a better understanding of the special conditions of the large class environment.

The studies have reported large class teaching in several continents, surveys of the class sizes which are considered large, as well as they have tried to identify the special characteristics and conditions of large classes.

The reports have established that many elements of large class language teaching are similar, but it has not been possible to establish a student number beyond which everyone can agree that a class becomes large.

The reports attempting to identify the special conditions of large classes are by necessity very preliminary, and this paper may be seen as a preliminary attempt to evaluate the large class environment. This paper will use the results of reports number 5 and 7 by LoCastro and McLeod, who discuss teacher reactions to surveys of what is possible in large classes. LoCastro for Japanese teachers and McLeod for teachers of a variety of nationalities and backgrounds.

These two reports do not attempt to classify the various teacher reactions into a

hierarchy of importance, and the data is strictly qualitative. As a result it may be expected that the reported reactions do not carry equal weight for all teachers.

The teacher responses were elicited by the 'difficulties' survey of the large class research group (LoCastro, 1989). The 'difficulties' survey questionnaire asked language teachers to complete the statement: "Large classes make it difficult for me to do what I would like to do because" ....Both LoCastro (Project Report No. 5) with Japanese teachers, and McLeod (Report No. 7) with teachers of many more nationalities, administered this survey and they were able to group the responses into three very similar categories. However, the two reports used different names for the categories, and the following will use LoCastro's terminology for the areas of complaints: pedagogical, management, and affective.

It seems significant that both LoCastro's and McLeod's respondents listed very similar concerns with their work in large classes. Despite the very different backgrounds and different perceptions of the size that constitute a large class. It could have been expected that teachers who consider relatively smaller classes large would have different concerns from teachers who find 'really' large classes large, but this does not seem to be the case.

One reason may be that despite the differences that teachers report in the size of class that is considered large, they also report that they teach in classes they consider too large for effective teaching (LoCastro). It may be that the environment of classes that are felt to be large is considered unmanageable and limiting by the instructors, irrespective of where they put their borderline between large and small classes.

This paper will use the specific problems that instructors have reported to discuss the implications of these specifically mentioned problems in large classes. The aim of this discussion is to get a better perception of the limitations that large classes impose on instructor ability to teach, and to explore what options remain for language teaching despite the limitations.

Concentrating on an evaluation of problem areas raises the danger that large classes may be perceived as a limiting language learning environment, and that positive aspects get insufficient attention. I will attempt to guard against that by drawing on observations of conditions in large classes and personal experience. It is hoped that the discussion will provide a focus for further inquiry into and evaluation of what can and need be done to improve teaching and learning in large classes.

The following will deal with the three groups of complaints in turn, pedagogical, management, and affective. It will briefly evaluate what each of the complaints involve, and suggest how the particular limitation can be overcome.

The various items are of course interconnected, but initially looking at them individually will help reveal what they represent in isolation, and bringing together the

implications of several or all then allows a further exploration of what activities become difficult with these limitations, as well as what can be profitably pursued in a large classroom. It will be assumed that the difficulties are seen in contrast to what is thought possible in a classroom where the number of students is considered manageable.

The conclusions will attempt to integrate the various suggestions and tentatively explore what activities large class language teaching can profitably engage in.

Pedagogical

The pedagogical concerns expressed by the language teachers include: 1) Difficulties with speaking, reading, and writing tasks; 2) Difficulties with monitoring and giving feedback; 3) Problems in individualizing work; 4) Avoidance of tasks that are demanding to implement; 5) Difficulty getting around the classroom; and 6) Poor attention of students.

Item 1 would seem to indicate that listening, the skill not mentioned to pose difficulties, is a candidate for use in large classes. However considering item 2, listening to tapes and other prepared materials may not be seen to work. Rather this perceived problem (item 2) seems to suggest that using the target language in the classroom, to provide input that is situational and relevant to the particular class is a viable option.

Item 2 points to the problem of knowing how students respond to the teaching in a large class, different students would have problems with different aspects of the material presented, and without students actively informing the instructor it will not be possible to give feedback that responds to specific needs. Even when feedback is possible the attention paid to one or a few students may cause other activities to stop, and result in the other students losing interest in the lesson. To overcome this, it would seem necessary for the instructor to present material that is easily grasped by a large majority of the students, and when moving beyond such material, to carefully grade it so that the majority of students do not get lost. Here the t + 1 concept introduced by Krashen comes to mind (Krashen, 1985) as an option that could be acceptable to many instructors. Instruction in a large classroom would seem to be well served by a carefully thought out incremental progression of the language presented.

Individualizing work is also thought to pose problems, with few students in a class it is possible to tell different students to do different things as their individual problem areas and interests are identified. With a large number of students this may be limited to the instructor providing a number of different assignments, to ensure that all students do their own assignments.

The different assignments would not be in response to the needs of specific students, but with a carefully graded progression they would probably leave very few students behind. To effect this, the instructor will need to have access to copiers and reproducible materials. Such resource requirements are not inconsiderable, even when modern technology does make it a viable option. Over time and with cooperation most institutions would however be able to build up a stock of suitable materials.

Difficulties in implementation possibly relates to the need for keeping all students busy for as much of the time as possible to ensure that attention and concentration is not lost. With highly motivated students this is perhaps not a serious concern, but with the generally low motivation perceived to persist in large classes it becomes a problem, and would prohibit the use of many available texts and tasks in a large classroom. Activities that students are already familliar with offer a potentially attractive solution. This would include activities employed in other subjects or learned in the previous language study. One result of relying on familiar methods may be that students are exposed to less of a variety of tasks than is perhaps desirable. There would then be a need to introduce students to other methods and procedures, maybe in coopration with teachers of other subjects, or gradually, stepwise as the large class teacher feels it becomes possible in a particular situation.

Item 5 would intuitively seem to relate to the following group, management. However when an instructor wishes to respond to a student, it takes time to get to where this student sits, and the instructor may have to lean over and disturb one or more neighbors to find out what the problem is. This highlights the negative pedagogical implications caused by difficulties in getting around. Suitable seating with adequately large classrooms would seem to be the way to overcome much of this problem, but it may be difficult to convince school management of the need for special classrooms and equipment for language classes. However it is important to keep in mind that problems of this kind, only indirectly related to the learning, are a central concern in the large class.

Poor student attention is a common problem, and this, perhaps more than the other conditions, decreases the effectiveness of teaching in large classes. Tasks may have to be repeated, instructions are not grasped by all, or not grasped in the same manner by all. The instructor may lose contact with a class, leading to a breakdown in communication, with resulting poor learning. Repeating and redoing material will often make classes boring to both instructor and students, but will be necessary to ensure that material is thoroughly learned.

This indicates the need to have a great variety of material available for any one topic. With a variety of materials, repetitions need not appear as simply redoing an exercise or activity. Further, as some students have grasped the point(s)being repeat-

ed, they can 'jolly' their fellow students along and this may do wonders to their perceptions of achievement.

Overall, the pedagogic concerns mentioned would seem to advocate a strong listening component integrated with a very gradual progression. At the same time a variety of material and familiar tasks would offer reinforcement and ensure that only the smallest possible number of students are left behind.

Observing these four conditions would make teaching possible and need not unduly compromise learning.

The need for variety together with gradual progress, would seem to be the central concern that needs most attention. Carefully graded materials and repeated introduction in a variety of forms would seem attractive, and the instructions and classroom discourse can then comfortably be conducted in the target language. As a result, the students would get a feeling of having succeeded most of the time (new material presented gradually) and the target language is used in the class.

The problems involved in attempting to implement such a scheme would be in using materials and tasks that the students find boring or irrelevant, and in that the listening could become stereotyped and not represent real language use. Still, with a wide variety of ways to address the different elements of a curriculum, and the classroom discourse conducted in the target language, there is a real possibility for creating a challenging and interesting language learning environment.

Management

Management problems include: 1)Correction of large numbers of essays in writing classes; 2) Pair/group work is difficult to execute; 3) High noise level and the need for using a loud voice is tiring and affects study in neighboring classes; 4) Impossibility to attend to all students; 5) Dicipline problems;and 6) Difficulties with giving back homework quickly after tests etc.

Item 1 here perhaps expresses a concern to correct homework thoroughly and 'perfectly,' to provide maximum feedback to students. The time required for such would probably result in homework being assigned only rarely, and less frequently than the instructor sees as necessary. Anecdotal evidence supports that this could be the case, and would seem to be at odds with a 'learning by doing' approach. Handing back homework uncorrected, or only partly corrected seems a viable alternative, which however many instructors might feel uncomfortable with. It is still an option and instructors concerned with item 1 would be advised to experiment with such a scheme.

Setting up groups and pairs to practice language tasks would need to be fairly eventless and smooth to be a common feature in a large class. Concerns about the very dif-

ferent levels of motivation, and the difficulties with moving furniture around in the classroom probably act as a deterrent to group work. Initially conducting group work with tasks that do not involve oral work could instill such habits and provide a graduated approach to independent group work. Groups of students handing in cooperatively produced homework would also help to cut down on the amount to be corrected.

Working in an excessively noisy environment (item 3) is tiring and a quiet classroom would be welcomed by most teachers. However, high noise levels do not seem to be the problem as such. With thin walls and open windows it can however easily become difficult to maintain amicable relations with colleagues and other workers at schools. Music lessons do seem able to overcome this problem however.

The difficulty in attending to all students (item 4) may reflect similar concerns as the difficulty in correcting much homework, a wish to supervise all student produced language together with a perception that correction is necessary whenever something is seen to be wrong. With numerous students, and very different levels of motivation and ability this is a valid concern, and the ability to physically reach all students may be necessary for the instructor to accept the learning environment as meaningful. However a certain amount of "live and let live,"a relaxation of the policing functions in instruction would often help to make time available to attend to students who need attention. There will be times however, when there are no obvious or acceptable ways to attend adequately to all students who could benefit from such attention.

Item 5, discipline problems, refers to not just inattention but also to latecomers and other disrupting elements. These take up much time, and require a great deal of effort to resolve with a large group. Especially so when the instructor feels outnumbered and not fully in control.

Providing timely feedback by returning homework promptly will be difficult with the large number of tests etc. to be corrected. As in item 2, a measured, deliberate effort to reduce the work load involved in correcting and responding can help alleviate this.

The management concerns would seem to call for a deliberate effort to reduce the work involved in correcting hormework, expanding the use of groups to all four skill areas, while ensuring that the work is meaningful.

If this is achieved however, student interest would likely increase, and the noise would change to become that of students trying to do whatever task is at hand. This would still leave the need for better individual attention, but could release instructors for tasks they would find more meaningful.

Affective

Affective concerns include: 1)Difficulty in learning student names; 2)Impossibility of establishing good rapport with students; 3) Difficulty to attend to weaker students; 4)Difficulties in assessing student interests and moods; and 5)Teachers getting bored with much pair and group work.

Teacher student relations affect teacher impressions of particular classes strongly, and this is perhaps well expressed by the items here. If there is no communication beyond the teacher initiated instructions for teaching, the result may be a very bleak classroom atmosphere. Knowledge of student names is essential to establish rapport with sudents, or at least necessary for the instructor to feel comfortable with a sea of only vaguely familiar faces. It is possible to have students write their names at their desks of wear badges, although the teacher would still not know the names. However, when an instructor is able to address students with their names many difficulties seem to become less important.

Being able to address students by name would be an important step towards establishing rapport, however instructors will still not be able to obiain a detailed knowledge of the learning problems and styles of their students except in a very general way.

Item 3 seems to involve two aspects, identifying weak students and then finding opportunities to attend to them. The time an instructor spends with a class is quite limited, and becoming aware of who needs what kind of special attention will take time. Isolating such students for special attention may seem attractive, but putting them together with more able classmates is often more helpful to both parties, considering the limited time available during lessons.

Assessing student interests (a somewhat stable quantity) may be possible, but tuning in to the mood or attitude of a class(a very variable matter)requires a very sensitive, experienced, and attentive instructor. Again a proper selection of tasks for the students to work on, tasks that are familiar while providing new elements will generally create a positive atmosphere. However misjudging the mood of a class, especially early in the year should not discourage instructors unduly.

Much group or pair work will result in much of the responsibility for learning being transferred to the students, with the instructor left as an underemployed bystander. In most situations this would be a positive development and offers the instructor the opportunity to do things that are not commonly possible, talking to individuals or groups of students, or monitoring work in progress. It is generally possible to assign study that is meaningful without taking away responsibility from the students, and still leave the instructor free. If however much group work is performed for reasons

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that the instructor cannot accept, it may be desirable to cut down on group work, and explore alternative activities that are more acceptable.

Instructor boredom in general must certainly be guarded against as a lack of interest in the happenings in the class will eventually cause other problems.

The critical element in assuring a positive affective environment in large classes would seem to involve finding ways to learn student names, and establish rapport with the class. As mentioned above, the use of badges or similar could achieve this.

Further, providing doable tasks seems important to give students a feeling of success, which would then translate into a positive and active approach to the language study. Not trying to control every utterance and activity in the target language could get students to relax more, and perhaps enjoy the study better.

Much large class teaching is strictly teacher centered. By moving away from that, students would initially feel unease and insecurity, but graduating the change from teacher centered to a situation with more student responsibility would overcome this. Such an approach would need an active teacher with a clear idea of when to let students alone and when to intervene. This would protect from teacher boredom and provide an avenue to establish a student teacher relationship based on trust.

Conclusions

The above has discussed the possibilties that language learning in large classes offer, based on the limitations which teachers feel that the large class environment impose. The discussion shows that teaching is not impossible, and that teaching does not have to rely on teacher centered activities.

Rather, it appears that listening practice, in the target language and provided by the teacher, is a viable option to anchor other activities around. Variety and graded progress are essential, with a plentiful variety of materials required for specific teaching tasks.

To keep the teacher workload manageable, homework can be corrected lightly, to make frequent assignments possible. Providing flexibility to fit a particular curriculum.

Special arrangements and effort are necessary to learn student names, and with carefully graded tasks (which all or nearly all students can complete successfully), a good rapport with the large number of students becomes a distinct possibility.

The various suggested activities and approaches would probably require most reachers to change some of the ways and attitudes that guide their teaching. This need not be abrupt however, change can take place gradually, as the teacher feels the need or advantage of implementing new ways, or when the curriculum invite such ap-proaches.

The most important result of the discussion here seems to be that the teacher expressed difficulties need not be seem to necessitate a teacher centered grammar-translation focused study that excludes the use of the target language in the classroom discourse.

The analysis shows that large classrooms can be made to provide challenging learning situations, and that teacher perceived handicaps would diminish when a challenging learner sensitive environment is provided.

Note: This is an expanded and updated version of a paper delivered at the 1992 annual conference of the Communication Association of Japan, in Tokyo, June 27 28, 1992.

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